



NJDOE News

Contact: Richard Vespucci
For Release: July 12, 2000

[Safe Schools Report](#) Shows Overall Decline in School Disruption

The Department of Education today issued the *Commissioner's Annual Report to the Legislature on Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Schools*. The report, required by state law, provides the Legislature with trend data in four broad categories of incidents: violence, vandalism, weapons and substance abuse. It also summarizes initiatives taken by the department to help districts ensure that schools are safe places to learn.

From 1997-98 to 1998-99, the total number of incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons and substance abuse reported by school districts to the Department of Education decreased by seven percent, from 27,872 to 25,969.

"Educators and law enforcement officials in New Jersey have worked together for many years to develop laws, regulations and agreements to keep our children safe in school," said Gov. Christie Whitman. "While no school can be made completely free from incidents of violence, we believe we are succeeding in developing an overlapping system of deterrents and penalties for violent activity, as well as preventive and alternative programs for those students who are at risk of failure in a traditional school environment."

"The overall decline in the number of incidents is encouraging," said Commissioner of Education David Hespe. "Local school officials appear to be more willing to report these incidents than they have in the past. Through their cooperation, we are getting a clearer picture of the frequency and nature of disruptive behavior in our schools."

"We will continue to show leadership at the state level by aggressively promoting programs and initiatives to deter school violence and promote positive student behavior," Commissioner Hespe said.

The Department of Education has pursued a variety of policy and program strategies to address the issues of disruptive behavior and violence in recent years, beginning with the Safe Schools Initiative in 1994. More recent efforts cover a broad array of policies, programs and strategies, including policy and procedural guidance to school districts; enforcement of zero tolerance policies; and an on-line electronic reporting system on violence and vandalism. The department has distributed more than \$8 million in federal funds to address violence prevention and intervention in schools and has developed and distributed resource materials and staff to help local schools exercise their responsibilities to keep schools safe.

A major new initiative to be launched in the 2000-2001 school year is the Governor's New Jersey Character Education Partnership Initiative. Governor Christie Whitman included the \$4.7 million initiative in her budget to help local school districts to develop or enhance character education programs in at least one school building in the next school year. Character education has been shown to lead to a reduction in student disciplinary actions. To kick off the New Jersey Character Education Partnership, the Department of Education sponsored a statewide conference in May. The department will provide featured presentations, technical support and ongoing consultation to local schools throughout the school year.

Statewide figures on violence, vandalism, weapons and substance abuse reported by public schools to the department in 1998-99 compared with 1997-98 indicate:

- Violence incidents decreased by seven percent, from 14,152 in 1997-98 to 13,320 in 1998-99. The decrease was concentrated in the category of "Fight." However, those incidents where the victim was a staff member increased by 30 percent, many of which were verbal threats and reflect the use of zero tolerance policies and a heightened awareness of the reporting process by staff.
- Vandalism decreased by 12 percent and fell below 7,000 incidents for the first time since 1985. Damage to property and theft accounted for the largest portion of the overall decline in this category.
- Excluding bomb offenses, weapons offenses declined by four percent, from 1,414 in 1997-98 to 1,353 in 1998-99. Most of the bomb offenses were bomb scares and thus may be excluded from the weapons category. Including bomb offenses in the calculation, the number of weapons offenses increased by eight percent, from 1,589 in 1997-98 to 1,723 in 1998-99.
- Possession of firearms declined by 36 percent, from 84 in 1997-98 to 54 in 1998-99.
- Substance abuse incidents decreased by five percent, from 4,214 in 1997-98 to 3,992 in 1998-99.

Commissioner Hespe noted that reporting of incidents for the annual report is the responsibility of each local school district and can be subject to local interpretation of the categories. The Department of Education has in recent years improved the reporting process by clarifying the reporting categories and providing a training video to assist local district personnel responsible for filing their reports.